

Svitlana Biedarieva (ed.)

Contemporary Ukrainian and Baltic Art

Political and Social Perspectives, 1991–2021

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**CONTEMPORARY
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Introduction

Svitlana Biedarieva

The current volume is dedicated to a plethora of perspectives elaborated by art researchers and historians from Ukraine and the Baltic countries: Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia. The book emerged due to the necessity of consolidating and comparing the art in the former Soviet territories once they gained independence following the dissolution of the USSR in 1991. The included texts aim to establish a conceptual pattern to reveal an intertextual network for the development of art in these countries between 1991 and 2021.

As the first collaborative, comparative research effort to discuss contemporary art in Ukraine and the Baltics, the book gathers texts from prominent art historians and curators in the field, who discuss questions of identity, memory, trauma, and social change, as reflected in the art of the last three decades. Consequently, this book represents a comprehensive look at the artistic transformations that took place after independence. It explores how artists reflected on social changes and the modifications of their perspectives after the consolidation of the two worlds divided by the Iron Curtain. However, the scope of this book is not only backward-looking but also interprets the artistic process through a contemporary lens, tracing how societal changes and the new demands of media and mass culture impacted art production.

As a result of their long-term colonization and the subsequent succession of crises, Ukraine and the Baltic region remain— if not totally blank—an opaque spot on the world art map. However, contemporary Baltic and Ukrainian artistic practices are too complex to be encompassed by a single formula; instead, one can see them through two lenses: of the past and of the present. The first lens is unifying, as it references a shared history, though experienced in different ways; the second lens, less researched, shows us how art responds to current social conditions and the challenges that cultures face. Baltic art and Ukrainian art need

more detailed research that would trace their historiography before and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and establish an interdisciplinary framework of notions and definitions. Consequently, art historians can employ these concepts in discussions of the unofficial and official art practices before 1991 and art reflecting the creation of cultural institutions and artistic groups after the 1990s.

Piotr Piotrowski's famous notion of "horizontal art history" is particularly useful for synthesizing the analyses presented in this book. (Piotrowski 2012) Specifically, Piotrowski has proposed applying a nonlinear, diffuse, and polyphonic model to the context of local histories, as opposed to hierarchical, "vertical" art history, which divides the field into centers and peripheries of art production. For example, the art history of Ukraine and the Baltic countries is crafted from the notions and visualities belonging to different ideologies, once suppressed cultural elements, and distorted identities, each proper for its location. The collision of these individual aspects has produced a new cultural reality that is still, on many occasions, uneven. The "sedimentation" of these elements and their establishment in public culture has been guided by the growth of new institutions and, at the same time, the elaboration of new artistic languages and idioms of art criticism.

In Ukraine and the Baltic states, the pervasive legacy of Soviet methods of art historical research heavily shaped particular forms of discourse regarding the art produced in these countries. The task of the current volume is to challenge such habitual conventions and take a step beyond them in the English-language scholarship on the subject of art in the post-Soviet space. With this aim, the current book assembles a constellation of themes discussed by the contributing authors.

Ieva Astahovska focuses on the Latvian transformation from a nationally-driven post-socialist to a transnationally oriented capitalist society and considers the broader postcolonial entanglements in Baltic art. She discusses the development of Latvian art as an independent phenomenon and reveals the footprints of socialism in the topics covered by contemporary art.

In my text for this volume, I review the documentary turn in recent Ukrainian art, which aims to record and interpret the ever-changing reality of Ukrainian society and to respond to the traumatic events of the past and the present. I explore the primary methods of working with documentary methods in art in the context of the ongoing geopolitical conflict unfolding in the territory of Ukraine.

Kateryna Botanova presents an analytical overview of the main events of Ukrainian art over the last thirty years, including the establishment of independent institutions that supported the creation of a new Ukrainian art scene. She assesses this development through the notion of “artist-as-virus,” an activist artist who “infects” the system and fosters its subsequent transformation.

Olena Martynyuk examines apocalyptic visions in the times of uncertainty that defined early post-Soviet Ukrainian art in the 1990s. She discusses how the failure of the Soviet system triggered expectations of renewal and fears of collapse, exploring how Ukrainian artists dealt with the traumatic past through their often phantasmagorical and ahistorical visions.

Lina Michelkevičė and Vytautas Michelkevičius engage in a critical approach toward artists’ interpretations of the process of collecting Lithuanian art and the institutional challenges that such collections face. They compare three dimensions of this process in art projects: the creation of a museum, occasional display of works, and their burial.

Margaret Tali considers the themes of memory and trauma in the Baltic art of the 21st century. With a focus on spatializing difficult memories, reclaiming minority identities, and zooming in on complications, she uncovers how contemporary artists narrate the recollections of totalitarian regimes and how the identity politics of the past is reflected and reinterpreted in the present.

Jessica Zychowicz looks in detail at questions of the body, power, gender identity, and emancipation as seen by feminist Ukrainian artists. She highlights the role of socialist visions in the formation of cutting-edge globalized contemporary art practices that merge gender and political criticism while focusing on exper-

iments by artists and activists working on disparate subject-positions and from distinct locations.

The current volume poses several important questions. First of all, is it necessary to unify the perspectives on the art of the countries in question under the “post-Soviet” label? What other factors might have impacted the clear parallels in Ukrainian and Baltic artistic practices? Throughout this text, the profound intersection between interpretations of independence and the construction of identity is the key to the comparison. For example, in her chapter, Margaret Tali uses an apt metaphor for these “constructed” identities: Demnikhov’s dog—a two-headed dog who appears to be a helpless victim of a violent surgery rather than a kind of Cerberus, possessing mythical powers. This straightforward, brutal image underscores the search for identity that defined the former Soviet republics, culminating in deformed and kitsch outcomes rather than a clear synthesis. However, art is capable of depicting this violent duality, where the belonging to and the withdrawal from the once common space persist in perpetual competition.

The ways of seeing by Latvian, Lithuanian, Estonian, and Ukrainian artists differ dramatically as they rely on local perspectives in the art that formed over centuries, and these local perspectives are often overlooked when not considering the ways that visual culture was produced and (re)formed throughout the 20th century. The local “archaeology” of signification helps uncover these layers of meaning, which accumulated during a time of both repressive cultural politics and the chaotic all-permissive surrogate culture of the 1990s–2000s. This clarification is of primary importance for understanding the artistic developments reviewed in this work. Did artists really become “free” after the divisions between unofficial and official practices were no longer relevant due to the collapse of centralized state control over cultural production? Or is this vision rather idealistic because we can identify the slow “drying out” of a centralized cultural system that maintained its local roots?

The book brings four distinct cultural spaces into dialogue in discussing important topics that include institutional structures,

memory, and identity politics. Specifically, freedom of speech, the burden of linguistic legacies, economic inequality, and the preservation of cultural heritage have become key concerns in territories with disputed cultural legacies. As Uilleam Blacker and Alexander Etkind propose, memory is often proliferated in visual culture—not as a resolution but in controversial and volatile ways, when ongoing social collisions impact the balance of how cultural memory and trauma are addressed—or avoided. (Blacker and Etkind 2013, 5)

Literary scholar Vitaly Chernetsky labels Ukraine as “post-colonial in the Second World,” arguing that Ukrainian culture reflects both the (post-)socialist version of the postmodern condition and the crisis of Russian colonialism. (Chernetsky 2007, 186) This definition provides food for thought. In parallel to Latin American cultural developments, Chernetsky links this statement to the visions of the culture of postcolonial post-Soviet countries, employing the method of magic realism to resist the historiographies of uneven development and create instead alternative planes and spaces where history is distorted. (Chernetsky, 187) Images, like words, are a powerful instrument for the defiance of the habitual historiographies of oppression. The culture of resistance that took various forms in the thirty years following independence both broke the preceding system of cultural referencing and created new intertextual and interdisciplinary networks. Our task is to reveal how these new networks functioned in each case: Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

This volume is one of the first attempts to see the art of Soviet “others” in a context that goes beyond the typical framework of the “post-Soviet” space that presupposes the divisions between centers and peripheries. The book considers the sensibilities of otherness in the self-identification that developed in the countries in question following independence, and it questions how artists addressed these ontological gaps. Moreover, we ask whether there is even a distinct space we might speak about, as both Ukraine and the Baltic countries (including Belarus) always presented a cultural bridge between the USSR and Europe.

As Homi Bhabha has proposed, political and social otherness rely upon an ambivalent discourse on colonization, presenting it simultaneously as “an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity.” (Bhabha 1994, 67) These fantasy worlds described by Bhabha are challenged by alternative, subversive constructions proposed in the art that looks back at its historiographies of resistance. Along these lines, Myroslav Shkandrij points out that the postcolonial discourse not directly opposes the once dominating narrative but, through a variety of discursive strategies, synthesizes a new vision of the elements of the past that can be used in the present and the future. (Shkandrij 2001, 191)

However, the task of this volume is not to focus solely on the historical dimension and possible parallels between the contemporary tendencies reflected in the art of Ukraine and the Baltics. The new epoch brought fresh challenges, political and social, and they found their place in art history as artists’ interpretations and commentaries on everyday life.

If the division within the USSR was articulated to its extremes with the fall of the Iron Curtain and the gaining of independence, new obstacles began to appear, marking new political, cultural, and social gaps: those between Eastern and Western Europe. The persistence of political topics in the art of the countries in question has to do with historical developments regarding the understanding of “autonomy”: while non-political art was seen as independent in the West, engagement in political topics was seen as essentially dissident and, therefore, countercultural in the socialist East. (Bazin, Dubourg Glatigny, and Piotrowski 2016, 16) We can feel the impact of this dual understanding on global art until the present day. Consequently, the art discussed in this volume takes on a variety of political topics entangled with social conditions, including the profound crises that we can witness in societies like Ukraine.

Paradoxically, another unifying factor is that the membership of Ukraine and the Baltic countries in a common territory or even the region of East-Central Europe may look equally problematic. Too often, the Baltics and Ukraine are identified as operating ex-

ternally of a seemingly all-encompassing democratic geographical concept. Instead, the arguably hand-crafted vision of East-Central Europe from many research examples still seems synonymous with “Eastern Bloc” countries that exclude the post-Soviet space. There are numerous ways to transgress this invisible division line, but first of all, in artistic approaches, we can see the interpolation and the cross-fertilization of methods, techniques, and perspectives.

This oscillation between identities is not mitigated but rather supported by ongoing policies and events, both internal and external. The liminality of Ukrainian and Baltic art lies in their persistence in the “in-between” space and time, linking “new” Europe with “old” post-Soviet territories and real or claimed aspirations of tolerance and inclusiveness with experiences of repression. From an anthropological point of view, these countries have continued to perform their “rites of passage” (van Gennep, 1909) between the past and the present, moving between the conceptualization and acceptance of history to its creation. The rites require mythology, which contemporary art helps provide to society. This liminal space is where the myth-making process and the state-building process intersect, despite the ambiguity of their directions and aims.

In the case of Ukraine, the war with Russia that began in 2014 due to the Russian annexation of Crimea and the invasion to the east of Ukraine, which is ongoing, has played an essential role in the production of narratives and images. The intangible necessity to understand these traumatic events is linked to a more pragmatic interest in the creation of materials as the basis for cultural resistance. The articulation of differences with the reality “beyond the border,” together with the rethinking of belonging to the more globalized picture, also comes forward in this process of reconceptualization, which is no longer solely postcolonial. The focus is less on challenging identities but rather on artists’ responses to the divergent ways of seeing formed in the neighboring countries by the preceding thirty years of independence.

The contemporary history of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, even though it looks less turbulent than that of Ukraine, has its

concerns rooted in economic inequality within a broader European context. It is also marked by a lack of solid political vectors that would define the development of each country. The inner differences in art practice also are not to be omitted. To demonstrate, even in the modern period, the art of Estonia, Lithuania, and Latvia has not developed equally, exhibiting a variety of influences from Central Europe and Scandinavia. Today, such artistic references are even more varied and extensive in reach. (Rosenfeld and Dodge 2011) The global pertinence of Baltic—and Ukrainian—art means that they belong to a network of horizontal relations among local art productions across the world. Such a perspective forms the core of the discussion about the universal values of political expression through culture and, more narrowly, artistic political concerns.

The change of artistic perspectives during the past three decades cannot be seen as linear, with constant breakthroughs and flashbacks that have occurred along the way, provoked by changes in the political trajectory and the constant re-identification caused by underlying conflicts of memory that at times fade, at times flare-up. Art intervenes in these conflicts and discusses and deconstructs them, taking them beyond “minor” histories of art within the global context while remaining rooted in local cultural milieux. The heterotopias of each artistic location function in distinct ways, reflecting the new relationships that artists develop with institutions and the broader public.

Belonging to a new common cultural space—in the cases of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania—and Ukraine’s long-term aspirations to join it are of significant importance for this process of crafting new approaches from local elements. The compelling proposals of post-independence art are centered on the recompilation of the past and adjusting it to fit into the framework of the present. Contemporary art in Ukraine and the Baltic countries is frequently perceived through a political lens due to the countries’ turbulent histories. I hope that this volume opens up a discussion of multiple new ways of seeing and interpreting art in these countries as they continue to firmly establish their positions in the geopolitical arena and within global art markets.